

ON PAGE 28

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PRUDEN ON POLITICS

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Smelling salts for the minority

Back to you, Aunt Eunice, wherever you are.
Your nephew Tip has work to do in the House.

This is just the box the Democrats in the House thought they could avoid by voting against aid for the Contras in the sure and certain knowledge they would take another vote after everything simmered down. Maybe the Senate would rescue them.

They'll get their second vote, and Tip's House Democrats are in a soup of their own making. That ungrateful scamp in Managua has turned up the heat, and by mid-April the pot will likely be simmering merrily. Even the purest in heart, as Tip and Aunt Eunice might define "pure," will have to swallow hard before voting against the president now.

The see-no-evil Democrats and their Republican allies in the Senate, stripped of the high-minded arguments their counterparts employed in the House, could only turn for counsel to their fears. The arguments of the Senate minority demonstrates the weakness now of Mr. Reagan's opposition.

Jim Sasser of Tennessee, who early in the week gagged twice, fainted once, and allowed as how maybe what the 6th Fleet did to Muammar Qaddafi wasn't necessarily all bad, was tormented yesterday by the nagging terror that the nation might one day be required to defend its national interests.

Mr. Sasser, who affects the mien of a semi-finalist in a Jaycee oratorical contest, has small regard for the proud fighting traditions of his state. The Reagan policy focuses on military pressure, he says, and that sends him looking for the smelling salts. The idea that the United States won't allow the Soviets to make a forward base of Nicaragua "threatens to tear Central America apart and draw the United States deeper and deeper into that morass and ultimately require troops."

The more the Sandinistas shout, with tanks and artillery and helicopter gunships, that they don't want to talk, the more Mr. Sasser pleads — somewhat in the manner of the spurned suitor who suggests to the girl that if she won't marry him maybe she'll let him go along on the honeymoon to hold the winner's coat.

Dale Bumpers of Arkansas finds all this talk of resistance fatiguing, too. (This is the South of moonshine and magnolias, perhaps, but what happened to the macho?) "Revolutions are like romances," Mr. Bumpers says. "They very seldom work when they are arranged by outsiders." (Better a little manly impotence than dashed expectations.)

Sen. Edward Zorinsky of Nebraska is a man of tougher stuff. He doesn't want to arm the Contras because they're "inept, incapable, and incorrigible." (Somewhat in the way of senators, an unkind man might be tempted to say).

Only a fortnight ago, these were the sentiments of the majority. Daniel Ortega changed all that when he sent his shooting party into Honduras and couldn't come up with a plausible denial of it, despite all the rooting that was going on here for him.

The early denials were not persuasive; even Tip O'Neill spluttered his rage at Dr. Ortega as a "bumbling Marxist-Leninist." The press pack tried to help, suggesting, as the Senate debate began, that the reports of the incursion into Honduras was an elaborate CIA hoax.

But last night, just as Jim Sasser and Dale Bumpers were pouring out the agonies of unrequited love and dreams of Latin romance, the Sandinista defense ministry was trying to get a story to fly in Managua.

Sandinista troops, Managua said, "destroyed important enemy camps" along the Honduran border. The government couldn't say where the camps were, because (a) it had been saying all week that none of its soldiers were in Honduras, but (b) it has been saying for months that the hated Contra camps are in, uh, Honduras.

This sort of moonshine was good for some of the senators yesterday, just as it was good enough for a lot of the Democrats in the House two weeks ago. In another fortnight, though, it will be stale beer for everybody.